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‘Girls’ Working Together without ‘Teams’: How to Avoid the Colonization of Management Language

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ABSTRACT

Many of us increasingly experience our personal and working lives through a range of categories and classifications that have come to be strongly associated with the formal management of organizations, the effect of which has been explained as a subtle colonization of our minds and imaginations. This paper presents insights from an organizational ethnography based in a UK hospital’s medical-records library where participants rarely used management discourses, the only managerial terms they used at all being teams and teamwork, and then mostly by way of parody, while strongly preferring an alternative collective identity, the girls. This paper therefore illustrates and analyses how these workers shunned, if not entirely avoided, management language’s colonizing incursions.

KEYWORDS: Ethnography, hospital clerks, management language, teams, women in organizations.

Introduction

The discourse of ‘teams’ is becoming increasingly pervasive in organizational life. Teams currently tends to be the name managers routinely give to work groups of all kinds (Sennett, 1998). Even academic organizational analysis deploys the word liberally whenever representing groups, and its use frequently seems indiscriminate. However casual and unexamined it may be, though, the naming of practices is never innocent. Acts of naming sanction legitimate forms of discourse and knowledge whilst disqualifying or rendering invisible other possible ways of knowing and being in the world (Oakes, Townley & Cooper, 1998; Cooren, Brummans & Charrieras, 2008).

That we call things teams became particularly pertinent during an ethnographic study I conducted between May and September 2005 in a department within a National Health Service (NHS) hospital in the United Kingdom (UK). The official hospital literature was replete with such terms as teams and teamwork, which managers used in routine and unnoticed ways. The monthly meetings which all staff attended were designated ‘team briefings,’ for example, and job advertisements typically used the description ‘team player’ to portray the kind of employee being sought. Indeed, *Join The Team And Make A Difference*, a slogan taken directly from a national government recruitment campaign for NHS staff, was the screensaver on all the hospital staff members’ computer terminals. However, the people with whom I spent most of my time during the field work – filing clerks in the medical-records department, workers who

maintained the paper records of patients' clinical details – rarely used the term spontaneously. They much preferred referring to one another as the girls.

A group of people in a work setting who rarely talk about teams might be particularly surprising in today's society, as the wider lexicon of terms associated with formal organizational management seems to be percolating steadily into our everyday talk (Deetz, 1992; Grey, 1999; Parker, 2002), and even into lifestyle magazines (Hancock & Tyler, 2004). This change is important because it raises the possibility of a colonization that suggests that human life itself might become, as Grey argues:

something to be managed, and [that] other forms of meaning or being in the world become marginalized, thus truncating the variety of human experience while promoting a form of experience, which, it can be argued, is disciplinary, degrading and confining. (1999:577)

Others who have commented critically on the incursion of management language into everyday life typically follow Habermas (1987) in understanding it as a form of colonization of the life world. Thus, Hancock & Tyler argue that the use of management language outside formal work arenas is 'an ongoing managerialist colonization of the everyday life world' (2004:619), while Deetz, also after Habermas, claims that the 'extent of the modern corporation encroachment into nonwork life ... might properly be called a "colonizing" activity – a colonization of the life world' (1992:17-18).

Various authors have explored the significance of executives' own use of managerial terms in a professional context (Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Faÿ, 2008; Jackall, 1988; Learmonth, 1999, 2005; Watson, 2004). However, works examining how such other people as members of the public use this language have still centred on professional people, those for whom 'management is part of our lives', as one member of a focus group put it (Hancock & Tyler, 2004:639). Contrastingly, what this study does is to show how people who associate little with managers use management language, and, furthermore, how they use it in their own everyday settings.

The aim of this study, therefore, is to add a new dimension to the existing literature concerning the effects of management language by close engagement with the clerks' day-to-day world. As the work progressed, the study came to focus particularly on the discourse of teams and the alternatives to it. The paper consequently illustrates novel ways in which those subjected to the teamwork discourse's colonizing claims circumvented them and shows one of the means by which they constructed alternative collective identities.

This second contribution is equally important. Even in studies that focus on resistance to the discourse, the concept of teams invariably remains as the central discursive starting point for debate and analysis. A risk exists, however, that such an unquestioned starting point might elide the existence of alternative collective identities, what may be called teams' other, alternatives which represent ways of avoiding managerial colonization. In emphasizing 'the girls' as the preferred formulation, therefore, this paper intends to construct ideas radically disengaged from conventional notions of teamwork and thereby take the debate in new directions.

The paper first reviews certain literature on teams, the one managerially-oriented word that the clerks did use, and which is therefore especially important to the study. The intent of this review is to show how the word teams has the power to colonize the

hearts and minds of those subjected to it, but show also how it is able to be resisted. Next, the paper reports on the ethnographic approach and the key findings, followed by a discussion of the significance of the virtual absence of managerial language and the preferred alternative, the girls; a discussion which emphasises the discursive impact of the word teams and of management language more generally.

The Colonization of Teams

This section focuses on what teams, as a category for making sense of the world, does when we deploy it in talking and writing about organizational realities, rather than on such more usual concerns of management writing about teams as what 'they' are and how 'they' might function. An approach which reflects the belief that representing practices as 'teamwork' is to some extent arbitrary. The label 'teams' creates a particular version of the world, a version which has political effects (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000).

What follows, therefore, makes no claim to be comprehensive in its treatment of the burgeoning literature on teams. This burgeoning reflects the new wave of managerial interest in teamwork that has gathered pace since the 1980s, when the discourse began to spread from the manufacturing sector into service industries and the public sector (Jenkins, 1994), alongside related rhetoric concerning employee involvement more generally (Proctor & Mueller, 2000). Indeed, it is now plausible to claim that 'a fundamental feature of [much] modern management theory and practice is teamworking. Human resource management (HRM), total quality management (TQM), just in time (JIT) and business process re-engineering (BPR) each share ... a common emphasis on teams' (McCabe & Black, 1997:110). This paper's understanding of the concept of teams, however, emphasises merely the one aspect of the literature that is most relevant to the study – the term's potential to act as a discourse of managerial colonization and domination – a discourse that is therefore also likely to attract dissent and resistance.

It has been possible to link the discourse of teams with the managerial elites' definitions of organizational realities, at least since the seminal work of Fox (1966). In setting out alternative ways of seeing organizations as unitary or pluralistic, Fox asked, '[w]hat is the closest analogy to the enterprise – is it, or ought it to be, analogous to a team, unified by a common purpose, or is it more plausibly viewed as a coalition of interests?' (1966:2). Fox himself expressed a preference for the pluralistic frame of reference, asserting that organizations ought to be thought of as temporary coalitions of competing interest groups. He did, however, recognise that the discourse of teams 'represents a vision of what industry ought to be like which is widespread among employers, top managers and substantial sections of outside public opinion' (1966:3).

Fox (1966) can therefore be understood to suggest that talking about teams conditions us to understand organizations in ways that coincide with the interests of top managers. Indeed, its taken for grantedness can mean that the discourse of teams can act as a resource for top managers by bolstering their interests while giving the impression that they are merely talking neutrally about the way things are.

Furthermore, because of its unitarist resonances, routinely representing organizational life in the language of teams tends to write out other available ideas about organizations. It is, for example, a tacit denial of what Ezzamel, Willmott and Worthington refer to in a Marxian sense as the 'structured antagonism between capital

and labour' (2001:1058), because the commonsense reading of teams misleadingly implies that everyone is playing for the same side and aiming for the same goals.

Fox's (1966) insights concerning teams as a manifestation of ideology have been supplemented by more recent work with greater emphasis on how talk of teams can be a powerful way for individuals to do identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). This means that the discourse of teams can act as a positive, if perhaps seductive, resource in the construction of individual and collective identities. Mueller, et al. note that describing joint activity as teamwork often connotes 'collaboration, conviviality, comradeship and commitment ... [the term thus] seems to carry a nearly irresistible appeal to social, moral and individual imperatives that are difficult to deny' (2000:1388).

An optimistic reading of what using the term teams does is therefore possible. For example, representing a group of people as part of the same team tends to imply reciprocity and equality. Using the term in this way could even accomplish such things as reducing traditional divisions in work places such as those based upon hierarchy or gender (Donnellon, 1996). However, internalising the need to be a team player is also likely to encourage forms of self-surveillance that are clearly in line with traditional managerial concerns with commitment, motivation, and so on (Barker, 1993, 1999; Ezzamel & Willmott, 1998; Sewell, 1998).

Given this ambivalence, many staff members are likely to 'engage with, respond to, imbibe but also oppose its [teamwork's] subjective demands' (Knights & McCabe, 2003:1588). This simultaneous engagement with, and opposition to, teamwork can be seen, for example, in Pringle's analysis of secretaries' relationships with their bosses, which shows how '[s]ecretaries can increasingly call on the language of "team" to insist on certain rights and reciprocities' (1988:55); however, she immediately adds that '[i]t is also in the boss's interests to talk the language of "teams" and disguise the actual workings of power' (1988:55).

The discourse of teams can therefore be read as potentially colonizing, both in its role as part of the naturalisation of a unitary ideology concerning organizations and in the way in which it can be deployed as a part of self-narration, through such conceptualisations as, 'I am part of a team', 'I am a team player' and so on. Furthermore, it is reasonable to believe that both these colonizing aspects of the discourse are likely to coincide to at least a significant extent with the traditional interests of those in charge of organizations in the sense that an unexamined use of teams discursively naturalises managerial interests.

Those who broadly accept this kind of analysis have elaborated two contrasting responses. Some assume that the colonizing discourse of teams dupes workers into regarding themselves as team players and thereby blinds them to the ways in which the discourse denies their interests and supports those of elites. These emphasise the tyranny of teamwork (Sinclair, 1992), teamwork being understood as a discursive socialisation mechanism through which elites control employees, aligning their motivations with organizational objectives (Finn, 2008). The other response holds that since the team discourse implies inclusivity, it is the very thing that can alert those who are at risk of being colonized by the discourse. Vallas (2003), for example, views managers who talk of teams as likely to be a focus for dissent and resistance, especially if a yawning gap exists between their ritualised pronouncements and organizational realities.

Of course, which of these two alternatives is favoured is to some extent an empirical question, and, as we shall see as we turn to the empirical study, it is the latter reading of the impact of the team concept which is more consistent with the interpretation of the phenomena advanced in this paper.

Medical Records Clerks

Employees in UK hospital medical records departments store, maintain, and retrieve the manual files, often called case notes, used to record patients' clinical details, which the professionals concerned generally still write by hand. Along with a whole range of related tasks, the clerks also make patient appointments and act as receptionists for them. [1] The volume of this work should not be underestimated. In the relatively small general hospital in the study, over 300,000 individual case notes were stored in the main library, which was administered by 35 clerks, five of whom were men.

It is also important to emphasise how others in the NHS generally regard such departments and the clerks working in them in terms of hospital hierarchy. In the particular hospital where the research for this study was conducted, almost everyone else in the hospital seemed to enjoy more esteem. In addition to professional clinical staff, secretaries and even switchboard operators regularly got clerks into trouble by complaining to their manager about relatively minor misdemeanours and omissions.

It was here, then, that I worked as one of these clerks in a hospital located within commuting distance of where I lived. As the proposals had been subjected to the normal NHS research governance arrangements, at the start of the project the hospital authorities had officially approved the work and issued me with an honorary contract and a name badge.

Each day I generally spent the mornings with another clerk, pushing trolleys of case notes from the main filing area across part of the hospital to the out-patient clinics, where people come from their homes to be treated by specialist medical staff. I spent the afternoons placing the case notes we had brought down earlier into separate trolleys for each of the following day's clinics. This gruelling routine meant that I could provide concrete help that reduced others' workloads and provide reciprocity for the many opportunities that were useful to my research. These included chatting with colleagues, listening to others' conversations, and experiencing directly the things that made up their, and at the time our, days. I spent a total of approximately 320 observation hours on site.

Originally, the study's central concern had been to observe the clerks in their natural setting in order to analyse how they used and responded to management discourses. However, as the scarcity of the use of management language started to become clear over the first few weeks of the work, the focus gradually changed to the alternatives used. This means that the basic empirical claims elaborated in this paper required no formal techniques of post-fieldwork data analysis for them to start to emerge. A lack of a team or any other managerial discourse was apparent after only a few weeks in the field.

However, an initial recognition of the significance of the formulation, the girls, was slower to take shape. Indeed, I hardly noticed that the clerks used the term about themselves for about the first half of the project. Then I experienced what might have been akin to what Adler & Adler describe as a "Click!" experience – something of a

sudden, though minor, epiphany as to the emotional depth or importance of an event or a phenomenon' (1998:81), and started to realise that the clerks routinely used the term, the girls, to talk about themselves, and that this practice might hold significance for my work.

I kept a detailed daily field-notes diary throughout the field work, completed mainly during lunch breaks and hour-long homeward train journeys, as I was generally kept too busy to make field notes *in situ*. And, during the latter stages of the work I conducted 16 unstructured interviews. I invited every staff member for these and interviewed all who accepted. Conducting interviews enabled our talk to be recorded and transcribed in full, as well as enabling our conversations to proceed in a relatively relaxed manner and at greater length than would have been possible in the midst of work activities. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

However, I did not use the interviews to ask the respondents directly about their attitudes towards management language. This was in part because I had already learnt that the clerks were relatively indifferent towards management discourse, making that line of questioning unlikely to elicit much of use. The consideration that the focus should be as far as possible on relatively naturally occurring language was also important, so that I also tried to minimise the imposition of my own categories and expectations on what was said. But another major consideration was that many clerks had expressed unease about the idea of being interviewed. Even though by that relatively late stage of the research I considered myself to be regarded to some extent at least as 'one of the gang' (Tope, et al. 2005:486), as others have found in researching groups who enjoy little conventional prestige (Skeggs, 1994), I encountered reluctance about the idea of one-to-one interviews. Indeed, some of those who declined an interview said they did so because they could not imagine how interviewing them might hold something of interest for others.

Therefore, although each interview started with questions about what it was like to work in the department, we often moved quickly away from work to touch upon such broader issues as our family lives, hobbies, and musical interests. This was not a problem for the conduct of the research. Since the analytical focus was on the way in which the clerks deployed language to represent their lives, ensuring that we covered a set of predetermined topics was relatively unimportant.

Indeed, the rigour for which I aimed with both the observations and the interviews did not come from a strict adherence to preconceived procedures and protocols (Bate, 1997; Humphreys et al. 2003). It came instead from 'a constant exposure to the other' (Linstead, 1996:14). I was attempting the reflexive model of science, embracing not detachment but engagement as the road to knowledge (Burawoy, 1998; Thomson & Hassenkamp, 2008). Over the project as a whole, I therefore came to know my medical-records colleagues reasonably well and, as far as I could tell, we enjoyed friendly relations. It was pleasing, for example, to be presented with a number of cards and gifts on my last day. I was, however, constantly aware of being a middle-class man in the midst of a group largely made up of women, many of whom lived on low incomes, supplemented for some by benefit payments.

Especially given this type of relationship with the clerks, my ambition is to show what Skeggs calls a 'conscious partiality' (1994:79) toward the clerks' own culture and lifeworlds. Clerks doing what is often called 'routine' work remain a major group in many organizations, but relatively few scholars have attempted to understand their lives

[2]. For although Dutton emphasises clerks' "positively deviant" characteristics' (2003:6), and Prasad and Prasad highlight 'routine workplace resistance' (2000:387), these sorts of studies are far from typical. Particularly in a UK context, a managerial perspective is typically apparent amongst the naturalistic studies of clerical workers within health organizations.

Therefore, although a few studies have suggested clerks' unnoticed-yet-powerful influence over such things as epidemiological statistics (Prior 1985) or the time patients spend on waiting lists (Pope, 1991), most research agendas appear to have been guided by interests other than the clerks' own concerns. Pope, for example, interpreted clerks' overlooked influence on waiting lists as a failure in 'management practices' that needs to be understood before 'we [that is, presumably, managers] will be able to tackle the problems of waiting lists effectively' (1991:210). In contrast, this study aims to contribute to knowledge, but with the hope that it will resist managerial appropriation.

Working Without Teams

On arriving in the department I started to listen for people using management language. Somewhat counter to my initial expectations, however, after several weeks in the field I noticed no spontaneous use of it. While people may have talked about attending a team briefing, for example, they did so because they were using an official name. I rarely heard clerks use the word team when speaking in any other context. During my entire time in the field I heard the spontaneous use of management-associated words on just six occasions, and the word in question was always teams or a closely associated formulation.

On four of these occasions people appeared to use the term in passing, but on another two occasions they used it spontaneously in a prominent way. The first of these latter occasions was several weeks into the study when a work-experience student from a local school gave the staff members a questionnaire about their jobs. I wrote in my field-notes diary:

... Several people were crowding round, helping Maggie [this and all subsequent names have been changed] to complete the questionnaire. Whilst looking at everyone else for help, Maggie read out the questions. One of them was: 'What are the qualities required by your job?' No one volunteered any possible responses. 'Qualities ...' she mused, looking for help from the others. After receiving no suggestions she eventually said, 'Well, I suppose teamworking. Yeah, of course! We all need to work in a team here!' As she was saying this, she raised her eyebrows and inflected her voice with evident sarcasm ...

The other occasion took place a few weeks later. I wrote in my field notes:

... Maria stormed into the office saying she was in a bad mood. She'd asked a colleague if she could borrow a trolley [a vital piece of equipment for moving case notes around], but had been told 'not really', even though her colleague had two spare. Maria protested loudly to everyone in the office: 'She had two, but she wouldn't lend me a fucking trolley! There's no fucking teamwork in this place!'

Shortly before I left, one of the clerks asked me about the study's findings. I told her the above two stories, and she replied:

... 'Yeah! Teamworking, my arse!' She then explained how, when taking extra case notes to clinics [those retrieved on an unplanned basis for patients arriving unexpectedly as urgent cases], the nurses would often just take them without a word of thanks [though retrieving them was highly disruptive to the clerks' other jobs], and if the case notes had not been properly checked [to see if enough forms, note paper, etc. were available in the file], the nurses would ring the medical-records manager and complain. This would then get the person who had retrieved them into trouble 'for no reason', she said, 'because the nurses could easily check them themselves; in fact, it would probably be quicker to check them than ring the manager!' ...

In contrast to the male factory workers in Ezzamel, Willmott, & Worthington's study, who seemed to take delight in displaying their 'awkwardness' and 'bloodymindedness' (2001:1068), the clerks appeared to be upset by each criticism they received. Individuals regularly emerged from the manager's office to tell everyone resignedly that they had just been 'told off', but I never saw them overtly challenge the deferential situation in which they found themselves.

Therefore, while I think the above teamwork incidents were important, in part because they were so unusual, it would be misleading to give the impression of a group of workers deeply concerned with the politics of resistance, or to suggest, for instance, that the virtual absence of management language stemmed from conscious avoidance. A more likely explanation would be that managerial categories were exogenous to their culture. The clerks did not use management language simply because it did not enable them to say what they wanted to say.

To illustrate this point, here is one of the four less prominent references to teams. It occurred during a taped interview when the informant was talking about her boss in a former job within another medical-records department:

... She was a good boss, and we used to go out drinking with her socially. But the girls, we were just like a family. Whatever anybody, you know, whatever problems they had, everybody knew about it, basically. But that's what I like about [the] records [department]. And it's the same here – we're a family, we're a team, we get on, we help each other, we go out and it's really good. We have a really good social life...

As with the other three less prominent uses I noticed, team was de-emphasised here, embedded and almost hidden in a discursive environment which constructed the department in terms that privileged people's social lives and personal problems. Had teams been the primary descriptor, perhaps the problems referred to would not have been personal ones, but those that the management officially acknowledged and deemed organizationally relevant. By mentioning the word team in juxtaposition with family and helping each other, it seems likely she was using it in its widest, least corporate sense of general conviviality and comradeship.

Nevertheless, and however we want to understand the word team in this excerpt, it is submitted that what is more important for understanding the excerpt as a whole is that the presence of the word team should not distract us from another term for the group that it also contains, which is the girls, a formulation that was particularly prominent in all the clerks' talk about one another as a collective.

'Girls' Together

In much social science writing, the word girls is widely seen as an unacceptable and patronising term for referring to adult women (Acker & van Houten, 1974; Katila & Merilainen, 1999). Indeed, Halford and Leonard assert that using "girls" to describe women of whatever age, even in their fifties, reflects the powerlessness of most women and the refusal to accept mature women as equals (paralleling as it does the once common practice of white people calling black men "boys") (2001:73). Nevertheless, girls was the term the female clerks themselves used habitually to talk about themselves. [3] Below are some brief excerpts chosen more or less arbitrarily from my field-notes diary to show the wide variety of contexts in which the formulation was deployed:

... Beth was talking to Lesley about a new recruit called Linda; Lesley didn't immediately realise who Linda was, so Beth explained: "you know, one of the new girls." ...

... A grateful patient brought a gift for everyone; after he'd gone the call went out: "there's cake, girls!" ...

... Staff in neighbouring hospitals' medical-records departments were known as "the girls over at [name of hospital]" ...

... a long-serving staff member (aged about 60), who was describing how things had changed over the years told me that the department had "got bigger; in fact I mean, when I first started, I think there was about, oh gosh, just a handful of girls" ...

Whilst it may be true that the term, the girls, can be used more or less unproblematically and regardless of age and hierarchical status by women who are talking about fun social groups, such as in 'a girls' nights out' for example, its routine use to refer to work groups might be more problematical. This is because women who routinely refer to their work groups as the girls seem typically to be those who enjoy little organizational prestige. However, these sorts of claims are necessarily speculative because the social science literature offers little in the way of sustained analysis of the discursive significance of the term, the girls, when it is used by adult women who are talking of groups to which they themselves belong. Perhaps this absence from the literature reflects an assumption that the practice is merely part of the unremarkable and normal way of things. However, as Ezzamel, Willmott, and Worthington observe:

normal appearances are presented and maintained only by actively and artfully engaging [in] the routines through which such appearances are reproduced. ... The normal appearances of self-identity are routinized, but they are not given or automatically produced. Instead, they are reflexively monitored and sustained,

even though the absence of any deliberate or self-conscious intervention appears to be a defining feature of such normalcy. (2001:1058)

In order to start to interpret the reflexive monitoring and sustaining of the term, the girls, to constitute the clerks' group identity, it would be useful to compare two interview excerpts in which the clerks referred to one another as girls. The first is in the context of a description of conventional work activities in office hours:

... I started off on fracture clinic, just doing fracture clinic, and then when, you know, the clinics were over, I'd go back upstairs [to work the rest of the time in the records library]. And then I graduated on to reception A, then reception B. And then one of the girls that was in the main office was doing the new patients [by herself because] another girl left, [so] I've been down here ever since...

The second excerpt relates to the importance attached to colleagues outside working hours, especially as the interviewee was a relative newcomer in the local area:

...I don't know anybody. I know the girls that I work with and that's it. I don't know anybody else in [name of area]. But they made me feel really welcome. Like I stayed at Katie's house and we went out and everything. You know, she texted me last night and said, 'Do you want to come for a drink? All the girls are meeting up!' So it's nice...

As opposed to the term team, girls appears to do a number of things in these contexts. It is, of course, inescapably a female term, so its prominent use seems likely to have enabled and reinforced a distinctively feminine solidarity, as opposed to the more masculine environment one might expect managers to encourage (Collinson, 1992). Indeed, the next excerpt shows how a respondent recognised the potential for conflict between being one of the girls and being a manager:

...She [the first-line supervisor] is one of the girls. When you're down, she's the only person that [speech trails off] – she does it to everybody. If you're upset and [name of supervisor] looks at you or comes and gives you a hug, you just burst out crying straightaway. She's just like mum, you know, 'What's wrong?' And you're just like crying, straightaway. You just start crying. Yeah, she is like one of the girls – but then, sometimes you just think she's also your boss and you can't be too girly, do you know what I mean?...

Taken together, then, these extracts might be understood to suggest that 'the girls' was a way of enabling speakers to assert an identity built around personal and socialised relationships (Coupland, et al. 2008), as opposed to the officially approved relations that come with an acceptance of such discourses as teams. Still, while being one of the girls might be different from anything likely to receive official sanction, it was nevertheless an identity relatively unthreatening to the bosses. Indeed, one can imagine a managerial indifference: 'As long as they do their jobs!'

Discussion

Two central claims emerge from the empirical materials presented above. The first is that a teams discourse was more or less absent from the field in spite of the need for the clerks to work together, and where teams did get mentioned prominently the clerks treated it with cynicism or humour (Collinson, 2002; Cooper, 2008). The second claim is that what was much more important than teams in understanding the collective identity of the clerks was their talk of one another as the girls. This formulation seemed to act as an alternative to the discourse of teams, which both distanced the clerks from managerial imperatives and helped them to establish a distinctively feminine solidarity – while not attracting adverse managerial attention.

Such claims represent a counterpoint to earlier work on the impact of management language in the personal sphere. Most commentators, as already noted, follow Habermas in interpreting the incursion of management language into everyday talk as one of the ‘alien forces [that have made] their way into the lifeworld from the outside – like colonial masters coming into a tribal society [they] force a process of assimilation upon it’ (1987:355). Habermas appears to believe then, that ‘colonial masters’ could more or less straightforwardly ‘force’ assimilation upon the colonized, therefore assuming that what he called the lifeworld, ‘a reservoir of taken-for-granted, of unshaken convictions that participants in communication draw upon in cooperative processes of interpretation’ (1987:124) was open to unproblematic assimilation. This assumption, however, starts to appear problematical in the context of this study in which management language can hardly be said to have been a successful colonizing force.

Two readings of the empirical material therefore present themselves. The first is the vulnerability of a teamwork discourse to mimicry; the second suggests a way in which the clerks constructed and maintained an obliviousness to managerial language, an obliviousness that may be interpreted as an immunisation against management’s colonizing efforts.

Mimicking the Discourse of Teams

The clerks were routinely subjected to the discourse of teams in their day-to-day jobs – it was pervasive in the local managers’ routine talk and in the official description of the clerks’ duties in job descriptions and similar management statements. Nevertheless, the only times the clerks themselves used the term in a spontaneous, self-conscious, and prominent manner was to treat it with humour and irony.

One way of interpreting such actions would be to see them as a mimicry of standard managerial pronouncements. A mimicry, according to Bhabha (2004), that can be understood as a form of disavowal that if it is hostile to official discourse is only ambiguously so, and therefore remains relatively immune from censure.

In the first excerpt, when Maggie was forced into using the language of teams by the questionnaire’s conventional assumptions, her ironic disposition enabled her to produce, as Bhabha puts it, ‘a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention’ (2004:160). In the second, Maria similarly turned the discursive conditions of dominance to her advantage, displacing her initial anger with a colleague by parodying

the sort of ritualised pronouncements about teamwork that managers commonly make. Interpreting her actions after Bhabha we might say that she enabled ‘other “denied” knowledges [to] enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority’ (Bhabha, 2004:162).

As argued earlier, from a managerial perspective it is likely to be desirable that subordinate staff internalise dominant discourses – such as teams – so that these discourses become resources subordinates use to construct managerially-approved workplace identities. However, Maggie and Maria’s actions hardly suggest that they had internalised teamwork. Instead, perhaps their mimicry indicates that they had found a subversive source of agency. Their mimicry enabled them to make choices and impose their choices on the organization to some extent in spite of their ostensibly low place in the official hierarchy. This means that they found in their mimicry of standard teamwork pronouncements a means to disrupt and disturb conventional ideas about teams by articulating it in a manner that was almost – but not quite the same as – that which their managers articulated (Frenkel, 2008).

The Girls

If the ways with which the clerks dealt with the discourse of teams suggest that they saw such discourses as a threat to their preferred sense of self, it is unsurprising that the occurrence of any management language was notably rare. Indeed, I want to suggest that their preferred formulation, the girls, allowed them to construct a more or less separate and alternative collective identity to the one their managers preferred.

The term, the girls, seemed to have provided a discursive resource through which the clerks were able to construct their work and wider life and through which they retained their favoured sense of self. Thus, it was one of the ways in which they achieved a personal non-involvement in the official sphere. As one clerk commented:

...We don’t talk about work, full stop – unless we have to! When I’ve been to meetings where managers are talking, it takes me half an hour to tune in to what they’re saying; they talk completely differently to us...

While the clerks were aware of the management discourses, and could go through the motions of attending such official events as team meetings, and would no doubt be wise enough to say that they were good team players during interviews, being the girls meant that they had little need for resistance, as resistance implies an involvement in the official logic, albeit a subversive one (Yurchak, 1997). Therefore, rather than using ideas drawn from such studies of resistance as disidentification (Humphreys & Brown, 2002) or Švejkism (Fleming & Sewell, 2002) to explain their relationship to the team discourse, on a day-to-day basis at least they seemed oblivious to teams or to any management term and its potential for domination.

Furthermore, their own formulation achieved distance from management without being conventionally political or consciously controversial, so it may be a somewhat different usage from more knowingly politicised deployments of formerly used terms of abuse, such as the appropriation of the word ‘queer’ by homosexuals (Lee, et al. 2008). It seems, rather, to have been a way for the clerks to achieve what Sennett calls ‘strong social ties’, which are ties that explicitly contrast with the ‘weak ties that are

embodied in teamwork' (1998:24). The latter ties are weak, Sennett asserts, because of teamwork's association with transient and de-personalised work-based tasks. Therefore, in spite of managerial attempts to define organizational realities in terms of teams (as well as by using such terms as strategies, leadership and so on) large groups, at least within the organization studied here, continued to live their lives as if management and its constitutive discourses were more or less irrelevant.

Conclusion

One of the purposes of this paper was to provide an antidote to the received wisdom about teams, which assumes that they are an inherently good and more or less unproblematic empirical reality, and to reveal some of teams' more opaque functions as a discursive resource. However, even if its more opaque functions have been successfully revealed, questions still remain about the impact that the absence of the discourse had on the people in the records department studied.

It is possible to remain pessimistic about the overall impact of the teams discourse, even when it was virtually absent, in that its absence could be understood as a marker of the clerks' lack of status. Perhaps below a certain level in the organization people simply do not qualify for team membership, and so it is impossible for them to make discursive use of the teams concept to advance claims to be treated with equality. Only such discursive resources implying subordination as that of the girls remain available. Understood in this way, the record clerks' responses to the discourse of teams become not so much a successful form of refusal, nor even an immunity, but merely an insidious form of marginalisation. More traditional forms of managerial coercion, such as their vulnerability to complaints by other occupational groups, remained sufficient as control mechanisms.

Nevertheless, the more optimistic readings this paper has advanced can still plausibly be maintained. Even though the rhetoric of belonging and membership that are the foundational allure of teamwork failed to bridge the gap between the clerks' status and influence and those of their more professional colleagues, the key addition this article makes to the teamwork literature is that it shows how the clerks were able to use other discursive resources to build a satisfying collective identity at work.

Contrary to a more pessimistic reading that sees the lack of a teamwork discourse to be a source of insidious marginalisation, the discursive resources provided by the use of the term the girls can instead be interpreted to have functioned to insulate the clerks from their managers and the wider organization. The position in which the clerks found themselves seems to have granted them at least some freedom to define themselves outside of the officially sanctioned discourses of managerialism. Whether that situation was exclusion or emancipation perhaps remains an open question.

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Notes

1. I began my career working as a clerk in a hospital medical records office in the early 1980s. This factor influenced the choice of research site in a number of ways, not least because it helped me access the site.
2. For a classic study of clerks, see Lockwood (1958). See Beechey (1983) for a pioneering review of ethnographies exploring women's paid employment more broadly, and for a vivid portrayal of the life of one particular hospital records clerk in a United States context, see the 2003 film *American Splendor* (Directors: Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini).
3. The five men who worked in the department did not generally call the women girls and they seemed not to notice the women's use of the term.

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